

Brandiston, St Nicholas by Stephen Hart



This church, now in the care of The Churches Conservation Trust, is one of a few with a round tower sited at the west end of its north aisle instead of at the end of the nave. This has caused some architectural historians to conclude that the aisle was originally the nave of a small early church, on to the south side of which a larger nave was added later. Personal investigations and measurement however have suggested that although an original church may have occupied the area now taken by the aisle, it was probably wider and longer than the present aisle.

In 1994, a filled vertical crack in the nave west wall about half a metre to the south of the quadrant fillet in the re-entrant angle between the tower and the nave west wall (Photo 1) aroused the author's suspicion that it might represent the point at which the later nave had been joined to the west wall of the original one, particularly as there was also a vertical plaster crack in a corresponding position internally. In confirmation of this suspicion, during repairs to the nave west wall south of the tower carried out in 1996, corner quoins of flint and Roman bricks to a height of about 2.7m were found 10 to 12cm behind the wall's facing flints at a point approximately 0.5m south of the quadrant fillet. The position of this quoin implies that the original nave would have been rather wider than suggested by the alignments of the arcade and the present north wall.

Though probably formerly a small two-cell church occupying approximately the area now taken by the aisle, the church now comprises a nave and chancel in one, a

north aisle with a round tower at its west end, and a south porch. It seems that major alterations were made in the 14th century: a new nave and chancel were built on the south side of the small church, and with the formation of a four-bay north arcade, the former church area became the north aisle which was later shortened at its east end, the east bay of the arcade then being blocked. A south porch was added and later, the chancel was shortened.

Nave and Chancel.

The nave and chancel of the same width comprises four bays, the easternmost being the chancel of the three-bay nave (Photo 2). Remnants of a blocked priest's door in the present east bay of the south wall suggests that this bay (now the chancel) may have been the west bay of a two-bay chancel, and scarred flintwork externally at the east ends of the south wall and to a lesser extent the arcade wall indicates that those walls probably continued eastwards as the walls of a longer chancel than the present one. Repairs incorporating medieval brick in the south wall east of the central window and in the flank of the adjacent buttress could imply reinstatement following removal of a former rood stair structure. The brick "footings" that extend from the buttresses at the east end are untrustworthy as an indication of the plan of a former chancel and may simply represent someone's fanciful conjectural restoration.

The nave has a tall Decorated west window with 5-petal tracery (Photo 3). A similar one in the middle bay of the three eastern bays of the south wall is flanked by windows of the same size and internal detail but with Perpendicular tracery. Between these windows there are three-stage buttresses on moulded stone plinths, and another of the same design at the south-east corner is a further indication that the present south-east corner is probably not the original east end of this wall because, by contrast, the buttress at its west end is a diagonal one. Immediately to the east of the porch east wall, there was probably another buttress, now demolished: the flintwork of the wall there is scarred and at ground level a short remnant of chamfered stone of identical profile to the weathering stones of the buttresses projects from the wall, a concrete slab covers the buttress footprint.

The west bay of the nave contains the south door with a simple moulded pointed arch with a hoodmould. The fabric of the south and west walls is mainly small coursed flints with a shallow eaves cornice of later brick, but the east wall is of flint and brick with a brick gable and reinforced with large three-stage brick buttresses, two on the east wall and one at the north-east corner balancing the south-east buttress. The east window in Perpendicular style matches the nave south windows though the sub-arches (aches, sic) of its lights are of ogee shape.

A three-bay nave arcade with quatrefoil piers and double-chamfered arches separates the nave from the north aisle. Originally of four bays, the east bay, now blocked though its arch is still visible internally, forms the chancel north wall and contains a Perpendicular window.

The nave roof is ceiled but a tie beam spans the nave at the middle bay of the arcade. The unceiled chancel roof has two half-sized bays with arch-braced principal rafters springing from wall posts supported on simple stone corbels.

North Aisle.

The north wall of the aisle is in two distinct sections though both are capped by a brick eaves cornice similar to the one on the nave south wall. The western section, approximately three-quarters of the whole length, is defined at the west end by a quoin of roughly-squared stones, flint and odd pieces of Roman and medieval brick, behind a later buttress, and at Point X on the plan by a hitherto unexplained straight vertical joint composed of flint and medieval brick (Photo 4). This section contains a pointed north door with stone dressings beneath an arch of flint and medieval brick voussoirs, a two-light Decorated window with four-petal tracery, medieval brick putlog holes and flint fabric containing cleft flintwork of a style not used before the end of the 13th century. None of these features show any evidence of later insertion and all point to a 14th century date for this length. In the shorter eastern section of the wall, the flintwork differs from that in the western section. At its north-east corner it has two-stage angle buttresses of the same design as the one that partly conceals the north-west quoin, and it returns as the east wall of the aisle. It incorporates a Perpendicular north window immediately adjacent to Point X and a Decorated east window of reticulated style.

Tower.

The tower was rebuilt in the late 19th century or early 20th century to a design markedly different from that shown in Ladbrooke's drawing of the 1820s and the quality of its flintwork implies late work. It is circular for three-quarters of its height and has an octagonal top with dressed stone corners but no windows. In the circular stage two-light modern windows face south, west and north, and lower down, a similar ground-floor window faces west. There are quadrant fillets in the re-entrant angles where the tower wall meets the nave wall; these, with a small amount of adjacent tower flintwork, and perhaps the footing courses are probably all that remain of the original tower. Inside the tower the east wall is flat and the tower arch is pointed.

Porch.

The chamfered entrance arch, with a hoodmould above, springs from semi-polygonal moulded capitals on half-round responds. The porch has diagonal buttresses and its side walls each contain a small single-light cinquefoiled window under a square hoodmould with drop ends and label stops. Originally with a shallow roof pitch as shown by the fabric of small flints on the front wall, a later gable of larger flints with a brick coping gives the roof a steeper pitch.

Interpretation

With little doubt, the quoins revealed by the 1996 repairs must have formed the SW corner of the original nave. Prior to their discovery, the tower's position at the end of the aisle rather than at the west end of the nave had given rise to an assumption that the arcade wall and the north wall had been the original church walls. This, however, seems improbable because there are important indications that neither of these walls precisely define the original church walls.

The original nave's south wall is unlikely to have been on the line of the arcade because the position of the revealed early quoins and, indeed, the point where the tower's south wall and quadrant fillet meet the west wall externally lie well beyond, i.e. to the south of, the west respond of the nave arcade internally. Furthermore, the tower arch is not central to the space between the north wall and the arcade wall.

As regards the present north wall, assuming that the later tower had been built axially to the original nave with its tower arch central, an original NW nave corner would be expected to be at the same distance from the tower as on the south side, i.e. 0.5m, from the quadrant fillet, but the present NW corner is only 0.25m from it. This suggests that the present north wall may not be on the alignment of the original church wall because the latter's outer face would probably have been a little further north, and the 14th century features of the wall described above seem to preclude it from being earlier. Thus, it now seems that neither the arcade wall nor the aisle north wall accurately delineate the positions of the south and north walls of the original church.

On the strength of the evidence that the church has to show, the following chronology of construction can be deduced.

Phase 1. The SW quoin of flint and Roman bricks discovered in 1996 suggests an 11th or 12th century date for the original church. A two-cell plan, shown by thick lines on the plan, is suggested by the salient angle of flint and medieval brick at Point X, which, though not now part of the original nave north wall, probably indicates the position of its NE corner at a set-back for an original chancel narrower than the nave. The two eastern bays of the later arcade (see Phase IIIA below) indicate the probable length of that chancel.

Phase II. The flat east wall inside the tower suggests that the original circular tower was an addition to the early church. The pointed tower arch suggests that it was post-Norman, perhaps 13th century, and is corroborative evidence for it having been added. It is reasonable to assume that it would have been aligned centrally to the then nave.

Phase IIIA. Circa mid-14th. An assumed steeply-pitched roof of the original church would have been removed and the original nave north wall was apparently demolished leaving the chancel north and east walls standing. The western length of the present 0.7m (2ft 3ins) thick aisle north wall was built with its outer face about 0.3m (1ft) further south than the original wall's alignment. The salient angle of flint and medieval brick at the east end of this length (Point X) is interpreted as the NE return of this new wall, forming the inset at its junction to the retained chancel north wall.

The Decorated reticulated window or, if restored, a similar predecessor, that is today situated in the east wall of the present shortened aisle, was perhaps inserted into the retained original east wall of the former chancel.

The south walls of the original nave and chancel would now have been demolished and the 4-bay nave arcade built. Stone corbels, two of which are still visible externally in the present chancel north wall, were built into the low windowless

clerestory wall above the arcade to support the wall beam of a new low-pitch, lean-to roof over the former nave and chancel, now the aisle. The east arch of the arcade, now blocked but visible inside the church, clearly must have opened into interior space, and since the “new” north wall did not extend east of Point X, the space to which that arch gave access would have been the east half of the original chancel under the new monopitch roof.

Phase IIIB. Later c.14th. The new nave and chancel of the same width were built south of the arcade, five bays in length with four buttresses in the south wall between the bays and the diagonal ones at the corners. A higher roof would have been independent from the new monopitch roof over the aisle, but it may have been slightly lower at the east end. The early Perpendicular style of the two nave south windows suggest that this phase was later than the Decorated phase IIIA. These two phases were interdependent, but the Black Death in 1348 may have caused a delay in the progress of the work and could account for the difference in flintwork of the new north wall and the new nave, and the Perpendicular windows.

Phase IV. C.15 or 16th. The retained north and east walls of the original chancel, enclosing at that time the two eastern bays of the aisle, were demolished and the present shorter east bay of the north aisle was built, with its north wall aligned flush with the Phase IIIA north wall and incorporating a 3-light Perpendicular north window. The Decorated reticulated window, or a restored version, assumed to have been inserted into the east wall of the original chancel in Phase IIIA, was apparently reset in the new east wall of the shortened aisle. The two-stage angle buttresses on moulded stone plinths at the NE corner of this bay are of the same design as the NW buttress which was probably added at this time. The eastern arch of the nave arcade, now exposed by the shortening of the aisle, was walled up, and a tall 3-light transomed Perpendicular window incorporated.

The architecturally ill-conceived junction of the porch’s west wall to the diagonal buttress at the SW corner of the nave is convincing evidence that the porch was a later addition to the nave since it is quite illogical that, had the porch and nave been contemporary, a diagonal buttress would have been incorporated in this manner at this position. The westernmost side buttress on the nave south wall referred to above was probably demolished when the porch was built, providing further evidence that the porch is later than the nave, had the buttress had been retained, it would apparently have been too close to the porch east wall.

Phase V. Probably c17th. The height of the porch was increased, as shown by the different flintwork of the gable and its brick parapet coping.

Phase VI. C 18th. The east bay of the 14th century chancel was demolished, reducing it to a single bay. A flint and brick east wall and its brick buttresses were built. With the exception of the roof over the east bay which according to Ladbrooke’s drawing of the 1820s and 20th century photographs (e.g. in the 1962 Pevsner) appears until a few years ago to have been lead-covered, the whole church was re-roofed with pantiles. This included the north aisle where a more steeply pitched roof continuing the slope of the nave roof replaced the low-pitched roof, thus hiding the low clerestory. To achieve the steeper pitch on the aisle roof, the height of the aisle north wall appears to have been reduced to the minimum possible as governed by the

apex of the 4-petal Decorated window. The eaves courses on this wall were renewed in brick, and likewise on the south side of the nave.

Phase VII. Late c.19th or early 20th. Tower rebuilt.

The conjectured layout and measurement of the original church have been derived as follows: Original nave width. On the evidence of the deduced alignments of the original north and south walls of the original nave, and assuming north and south wall thicknesses to have been the same as the west wall measured at the tower arch (probably the only section of original fabric remaining) as shown on the Plan (Fig 1) an internal nave width of about 4.6m (15ft) would result.

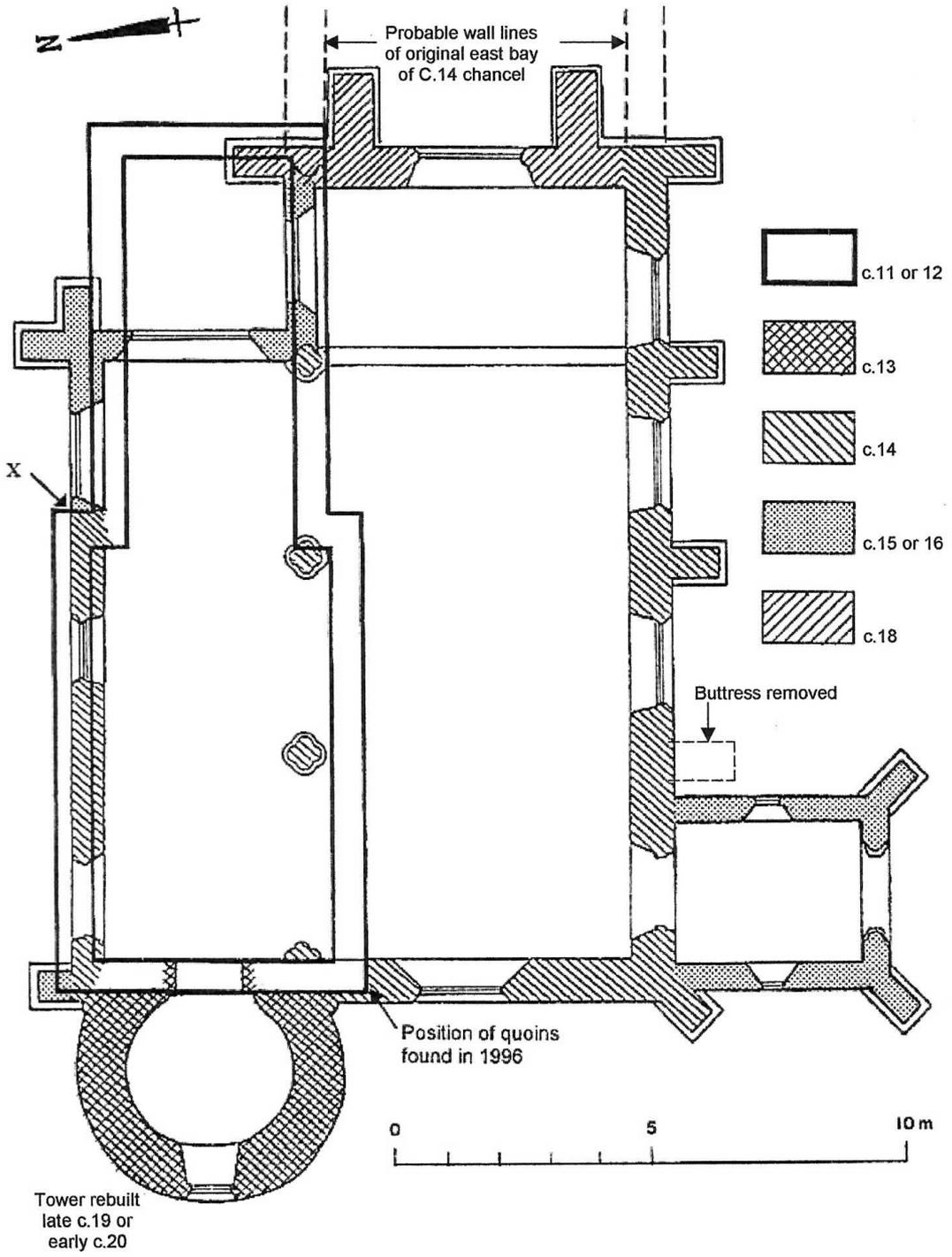
The present alignment of the 14th aisle north wall relative to the deduced alignment of the original nave north wall legitimately raises the question as to why the present wall was rebuilt so close to but not on the former alignment. One possible explanation is that by building it inside the former alignment with a low pitched roof, additional eaves height was gained for accommodating the tall Decorated north window.

The rationale for the present alignment is that a tower added centrally to the nave would, relative to the hidden original south-west nave quoin, give an original north-west quoin position further out than the present north-west quoin and therefore the present one could not be the original. If however, the tower and its arch had not been centrally located, the north-west quoin could be original, thereby placing the present wall, though later, on the original alignment. Also, if the nave side walls of the original church had been thicker than the conjectured walls shown on the Plan, the NW corner would have been at an equivalent distance from the tower as the SW quoins revealed in 1996. Thicker original walls than shown would have the effect of reducing the set-back of the chancel to the nave at Point X and marginally widening the chancel by a corresponding reduction of the set-back of the chancel south wall. The new, thinner, north wall would probably have been built on the foundations of the old one, with its inner face on the same line as originally.

Original nave length. If the flint and brick quoins of the present aisle north wall at Point X indicate the position where the inset at the junction of the original nave and chancel north walls occurred, as seems likely, that would establish the nave length. It would give internal nave length of about 8.1m (26ft 6ins).

Original chancel width. Assuming the wall inset at the nave-chancel junction to have been about equal to the wall thickness, the chancel width would have been about 3.25m (10ft 8ins). It would probably be possible to clarify this and establish the original chancel wall thickness by excavation or by resistivity measurement east of the present buttressed NE corner of the aisle.

Original chancel length. It has been shown above that the blocked east arch of the 14th century nave arcade must have given access to the original chancel. If the east respond of this arch had been of a similar design to the one at the west end of the arcade, that would establish the position of the original chancel's east wall, which would give internal chancel length of about 7.7m (25ft 3ins).



BRANDISTON CHURCH, PLAN